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BOOTH TARKINGTON: THE SEVEN AGES OF MAN

BY EDITH FRANKLIN WYATT

I

LONG ago at a distinguished performance by the Daly Company of *As You Like It*, I suddenly became conscious of how large a part of the poetry of that comedy is made by the different ages of the characters, the different lengths of the earthly pilgrimages portrayed in the forest sunlight of the enchanted piece—

Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.

Queerly enough it was not from the author's set statement on the subject in the celebrated speech on the Seven Ages, but from the whole composition, that I received this impression of true poetry. I was about fifteen, and being only too ready to see everything in the light of simplifications rather too large and fabular was delighted to conceive the earth as peopled by pilgrims reaching different points of a great journey. Ever since that agreeable matinee—and for some time before—I have found a peculiar enjoyment in the fiction of authors markedly competent in the characterization of age.

Every artist has a right, of course, to leave out this familiar element of reality, and with it the mystery and poetry of that reality; and in view of this fact it is astonishing how many writers of fiction choose, not so much to omit or to subdue age-characterizations, as to touch them in with a singular insensitiveness. With many fiction-writers no realization of any of the persons of a story occurs, where these are under twenty or over thirty. Outside this decade everyone in the book will sink into some dim limbo from which they emerge only to speak all out of their parts before returning to the vague from which their uninterested

creator has but partly evoked their unformed features. Or sometimes the creator appears interested enough; and indeed gives almost too much space and attention to infancy or those of advanced years. But it is of no avail, if the root of the matter be lacking, if the flame of concern, romance, sympathy, excitement for all ages as integral parts of the human story everyone must live, never illumine the presentation.

After many years of noticing this element of the art of fiction I have come to the conclusion that it has nothing—or very little—to do with the author's own age. It is conditioned chiefly by craftsmanship. Just as Kate Greenaway always "had difficulty in drawing feet and legs", so numbers of writers otherwise of high competence seem unable to portray babies or children, or people in early or late middle life.

Those who possess any technique here have commanded so little appreciation for it, generally, that one hardly knows whether to be more pleased with Mr. Booth Tarkington's remarkable genius in this direction, as evinced in *Seventeen* and other tales of his, or with the wide sympathy and applause accorded to that masterpiece.

This began with *Penrod*. I think it began with Penrod and Duke in the barn; and with that scene of the ambitions and occupations of eleven years, where the dog is at last placed in the basket, and lifted precariously by a clothes-line to the height of the feed-box, after his master's cries of "Elevater! Ting-ting!" Of course it is not only the eleven-year old consciousness of Penrod, but the infantile Mitchy-Mitch, and the unfortunate eight-year-old "Baby" Rennsdale, shunned as a pest in the dancing school of those three years her seniors, that delight the reader with their luminous precisions.

It was in *Penrod* too that one first noticed, as a reader, the author's gift in the expression of daydreams—Penrod's romance, *Harold Ramirez*, Penrod's dream during school-hours of astounding his fellow-pupils and long-suffering teacher by floating above them in the air, Penrod's histrionically prolonged appearance as a cripple after his fall from the barn ridge-pole, Penrod's fascinated existence as a weak imitation of the bully, Rupe Collins, his new acquaintance in the alley:

At the dinner-table, that evening, Penrod surprised his family by remarking in a voice they had never heard him attempt—a law-giving voice of intentional gruffness:

“Any man that’s makin’ a hunderd dollars a month is makin’ good money.”

“What?” asked Mr. Schofield, staring, for the previous conversation had concerned the illness of an infant relative in Council Bluffs.

“Any man that’s makin’ a hunderd dollars a month is makin’ good money.”

“Good money?” repeated Margaret curiously. “What is good money?”

Penrod turned upon her a stern glance.

“Say, wouldn’t you be just as happy if you had *some* sense?”

“Penrod!” shouted his father. But Penrod’s mother gazed with dismay at her son; he had never before spoken like that to his sister.

That bully, met so casually, and Penrod’s mental subjection to him, are portrayed with an originality so subtle in its expression that one is fully acquainted with Rupe before his second appearance and hardly needs more than a word or two to understand his stupidity, his cruelty, his irrational self-assertion. He torments dumb animals. He swaggers over younger children and torments them too. He exhibits the last competitiveness of the alarmed dominator fearful lest he be overcome for an instant by a glance, in any respect. Penrod’s temporary susceptibility to his intolerable friend and torturer is complete.

It will be recalled that the magic spell cast by Rupe Collins upon the now almost equally intolerable Penrod is broken only by the defeat of Rupe at the hands of his two youngest and supposedly weakest victims, the incomparable “colored troops in action”, the brothers Herman and Verman.

After the bludgy, defeated Rupe is chased screaming down the alley by the equally bludgy but victorious and elated Herman and Verman, after justice seems to have succeeded, and truth crushed to earth appears to have risen again, Penrod and his friend Sam bid each other good-night in a feeble, tentative manner, and without oral comment on the scene. Penrod returns home, and spontaneously voluntarily blacks his father’s boots. The spell is broken forever. “Penrod was zig-zagging back to normal.”

The description of this hand-to-hand conflict between Rupe and Herman and Verman constitutes one of the most unique and stimulating delineations of a fight that American fiction can offer.

Except the fight in Cashel Byron and Hazlitt's famous essay I cannot think of anything else in the language to compare fitly with this tale of fisticuffs. Its last touch has something quite beyond the finales of Mr. Shaw's or Hazlitt's capital pieces. Another composer than Mr. Tarkington might have ended on the mere successful outcome of the fight, or the shout of triumphant justice. But he follows the air of the music of real life further, and ends on a turn of existence which appears to me more subtly discerned.

After all the street and the court combats of the kind I have ever seen—struggles inspired by some needless, hateful piece of oppression, and resulting in a victory by force over the oppressor the more civilized observers have generally departed in a mood quite strikingly like Sam's and Penrod's, a respect for other than forceful methods, a silent belief in mutual aids, a mute, instinctive identification with all such means of common understanding and common reliance as we and our forbears have contrived in the savagery around us.

Too much to read into this masterly sketch of a boy's fight, and the impression it made upon a boyish on-looker? Perhaps. Yet, for me the implications of Penrod's impression are a leading distinction in the craft of a penetrating artist, implications of truth none the less clear from their lightness of outline and their tone of comedy. Each age of man has its own characteristic means of expression. Whatever this expression it seems probable that more men above twelve years of age than has ever been admitted have come home in Penrod's mood, after observing the splendors of elemental combat.

Indeed nothing has been more dully idealized and romanticised than the prestige and the entire "claque" of irrational brow-beaters. In more than one of his stories of the cruelties of existence, Mr. Tarkington has had something new and remarkable to say about the age-old tale of bullies and of stupid conquests and submissions.

II

It is an art to conceal art; and the world had hardly realized how brilliantly the ages of the neighborhood children in *Penrod*

were expressed, when Willie Baxter was sent by his mother to bring her a wash-boiler. He walked home with the wash-boiler on his head, and the thoughts of seventeen inside it; and brought an endless delight to all those members of American families who happened not to be seventeen.

Yet if the world now realized that the terrible malady was described with the clarity of the undeniable, this was not because *Seventeen* has less art than the *Penrod*. Indeed, in my view, it has more. It was partly because the world has a more distinct pre-conception of seventeen than of eleven, and partly I suppose because the book's composition was somewhat more focussed on the inner life of seventeen than *Penrod* had been on the inner life of eleven.

Seventeen seemed to afford an immense, æsthetic relief to a large and suffering class—the vast class of devoted American parents. The most loyal of these could permit herself or himself to enjoy freely the outbreaks of Mr. Parcher, the caryatid patience of Mrs. Baxter. For the imaginative sympathy out of which Willie Baxter's figure is created is gentle enough to reassure the most indulgent parent.

It has indeed the absolute gentleness and reverence characteristic of the genuine truth-seeker. For truth is subtle and fugitive and much more likely to be seen at large, in her living manifestations by those who are willing to create confidence in her by sitting around harmlessly on the grass all day and carrying no destructive weapons with them than by those who go out with a ruthless rifle, and all the disaffecting paraphernalia of the logical truth-hunter to the death, who can often show truth at full length indeed, but only as a corpse.

William's thoughts . . . were not very definite . . . taking the form of sweet, vague pictures of the future. These pictures were of married life; that is, married life as William conceived it for himself and Miss Pratt—something strikingly different from that he had observed as led by his mother and father, or their friends and relatives. In his rapt mind he beheld Miss Pratt walking beside him "through life," with her little parasol and her little dog—her exquisite face always lifted playfully toward his own (with admiration underneath the playfulness), and he heard her voice of silver always rippling "baby-talk" throughout all the years to come. He saw her applauding his triumphs—though these remained indefinite in his mind, and he was unable to foreshadow

the business or profession which was to provide the amazing mansion (mainly conservatory) which he pictured as their home. Surrounded by flowers, and maintaining a private orchestra, he saw Miss Pratt and himself growing old together, attaining to such ages as thirty and even thirty-five, still in perfect harmony, and always either dancing in the evenings or strolling hand in hand in the moonlight. Sometimes they would visit the nursery where curly-headed, rosy cherubs played upon a white-bear rug in the firelight. These were all boys and ready-made, the youngest being three years old and without a past. They would be beautiful children, happy with their luxurious toys on the bear rug, and they would *never* be seen in any part of the house except the nursery.

Many authors have expressed for us the thoughts of the thoughtful. But only a few of the most brilliant have succeeded in narrating the thoughts of those who can hardly be said to think at all. Youth's mental inconclusiveness, vacancy, imbecile, absurd idealizations, the singular fancied scenes that haunt youth's inner vision—above all youth's extraordinary lack of humor—all these as portrayed in *Seventeen* strike one as creating the subtlest, living image of truth.

III

The end of *Seventeen* and the end of *Gentle Julia* are of a subtle and living truth, too; and it is difficult to say why the close of each of these books strikes one as unsatisfactory. Of course one dislikes greatly to have either of these stories stop. That is undoubtedly the chief cause of one's discontent. But I believe it has also other and less simple grounds.

In the marionette shows of Italy whole populaces become interested in the fates of certain puppets whose fortunes they follow through many years. The interest Booth Tarkington's people arouse is akin to this. One of the most pleasing concomitants of his great gift is that, as with the re-active influence of Falstaff's humor, it is a cause of a more acute sense of the art of entertainment in others.

The enthusiastic audience of Willie Baxter and Flappitt and Florence and Herbert and Kitty Silver and the infuriated Mr. Atwater is not composed of persons waiting to see whether any of these characters will be murdered in the next chapter, or will die or be abducted as the result of a chase by a pursuant auto-

mobile. The audience waits to see something much more novel and essentially mysterious than the outcome of any of these familiar, sensational "dodges". The audience waits to watch the next day of the real life of old friends.

One knows very well that this life in the Atwater, the Dill, the Parcher and Baxter families is going on in the inconclusive manner of existence on this globe; and what seems to end one's delightful information about it is the mere, trying, artificial requirement of publication and the necessity for enclosing a book between covers.

Seventeen and *Gentle Julia* appeared in the periodicals over a space of three or four years: and perhaps it was this manner of presenting different aspects of the lives of Willie Baxter and Jane and Julia and Florence and Herbert and Noble Dill that aided in creating a peculiar kind of response. One seems to know these children and grown-up children just as one knows the children and grown-up children of friends and neighbors over a period of years. The population of these two books has entered our consciousness in a manner very different from that of the persons in the novel one "reads through at one sitting"—and will never read through at another sitting.

This effect of *Seventeen* and of *Gentle Julia* is in some respects comparable to that of those daily cartoonists of domestic subjects who have recently become so valuable, indeed so indispensable a part of our national life. Of course the lines that tell us of the sudden, intended departure of Noble Dill for China, and his equally sudden oblivion of his intention belong to an art of fiction which has all the dimensions, and *Someone is Always Taking the Joy out of Life* and *When a Feller Needs a Friend* belong to an art of two dimensions. But their basic material is in some respects the same. Briggs's pictures and Booth Tarkington's pictures are even akin in some of their points of view—in their conceptions of the individual lives of dogs for instance, and in their agreeable opinions of the intelligence and patience of women.

In the midst of the panic-stricken outcries of all the authors who go in terror lest the progress of civilization be successfully opposed and destroyed by the dangerous folly and vanity of

woman, the alarms voiced in *Idle Wives*, *The Feminine Nuisance*, etc., it ought to brighten the gloom surrounding these writers to learn that such rare types of women may sometimes be seen on earth as those who perennially save the situation in *O Man!* and produce the evening coat for Willie Baxter and let Jane splash in the rain-puddles.

Yet it is perhaps more probable that to writers with this depressing view of human progress such a manifestation as *Gentle Julia* must seem ominous in the extreme. For *Gentle Julia*—besides being a number of other things—is a highly humorous, and lively presentation of the phenomenon of our land known as “queening”. On the whole it is a laudatory presentation of some of those very motifs in our civilization which are so terrifying to the alarmists I have mentioned. Julia moves escorted by constant “attentions” and material extravagances. Is “spoiled” from birth. Gifts, flowers, verse, festivity embower her passage through existence. She is kind as she is fair. Indeed there is the main difficulty—not that she is too idle, too vain, or too extravagant, though she is all these—but that she simply cannot help being too pleasant to the opposite sex.

It was a summer walk that Julia had dressed for: and she was all too dashingly a picture of coolness on a hot day; a brunette in murmurous white, though her little hat was a film of blackest blue, and thus also in belt and parasol she had almost matched the color of her eyes.

It is all a thing of the most attractive summer walks and piazzas and light, floating dresses, and nonsense and Arcadia and sunlight and dancing and dancing and dancing, and grace and humorous grief and delight.

Every nation and every epoch—that amounts to anything—have excellent way-side shrines for demi-gods. Heine and Theocritus and Théophile Gautier, and the authors whose tributes deck the Greek Anthology have heaped the altars of these local deities high with leafy coronals and vivid fruits and trophies of shell and ivory and purple silk. These half-gods have never caused the gods to go. Gods who go because silliness persists on earth must be of very faint powers of prevalence. Our own epoch suffers in its letters from a considerable hypocrisy about prettiness—the chief use of all wayside shrines: and lacks

imagination to hear the shepherds pipe to Pan, or see the white and silver flash of Thetis's ankles in a thousand minor charms and lovely graces of existence that happen to be contemporaneous. Perhaps pretentiousness is the name of the shoals where the—

Mighty vessels have been wrecked by Time,
Since Herrick launched his cockle-shells of rhyme.

Especially the fiction of our own time often seems poorer for its dearth of an art of simple, refreshing prettiness without any assumption of being anything else—a simple refreshing prettiness such as was not beneath the uses of Marlowe or Shakespeare or Homer or Victor Hugo—not to mention the lesser masters referred to before. On this side, the agreeable, humorous picture of “queening” at our local American shrines which *Gentle Julia* perpetuates is all to the good.

Outside these considerations it should be said that here again Mr. Tarkington excels in his expression of the emotions of a certain age and in his expression of daydreams, the visions of that touching, enamored idiot, Noble Dill, the visions of young Herbert, the visions of young Florence.

But the most pleasant among the willing and unwilling attendants about Julia's shrine is one whose dreams apparently are better than those of humans—the figure of the black poodle Gammire. He is one of those magical outré beings of fiction like Count Fosco, Undine and Valmajour, who key the arch of the entertainment; and everything is chorded in the composition from the time when Gamin, “the golden-hearted little clown of all the world,”—

. . . “sat up” on his haunches, put his forepaws together above his nose in an attitude of prayer, and looked at her inscrutably from under the great bang of hair that fell like a black chrysanthemum over his forehead. Beneath this wooly lambrequin his eyes were visible as two garnet sparks. . . .

This dog was of a kind at the top of dog kingdoms. His size was neither insignificant nor great; probably his weight would have been between a fourth and a third of a St. Bernard's. He had the finest head for adroit thinking that is known among dogs: and he had an athletic body, the forepart muffled and lost in a mass of corded black fleece, but the rest of him sharply clipped from the chest aft; and his trim, slim legs were clipped, though tufts were left at his ankles, and at the tip of his short tail, with two upon his hips, like fanciful buttons of an imaginary jacket; for thus have such dogs been clipped

to a fashion proper and comfortable for them ever since (and no doubt long before) an Imperial Roman sculptor so chiselled one in bas-relief.

Mr. Tarkington's fiction has the interest of the work of one who seems to have kept an artist's note-book. Street-scenes, pictures of dogs, cats, washerwomen, cooks, back-yards, picnics, and a great quantity of admirable still-lives—the serial story of the automobile-equine survival—are rendered with the vivacity of a quick sense of picturesque aspects of existence which are not conventionally picturesque.

Considering all the singularities, exceptions and oddities of creation which the pages of fiction that I have read have chosen to describe, I have never found that one author, or all authors put together represented the world as half as "queer", half as bizarre as it is, half as full as it is of by-paths and mongrel types, and peculiar human fates and curious human viewpoints. Perhaps this accounts for the remarkable pleasure afforded by such scenes of Mr. Tarkington's as that between the children and Kitty Silver, when the latter says she "wont be no cat wash-woman": the scene of Noble Dill's enthusiastic bestowal of the umbrella on the desperate Mr. Atwater: and Florence's artistic enjoyment of her remark that if she were to pass away her relatives would "proba'ly just leave me lay."

IV

Gentle Julia is a summer comedy peopled with vanity and folly and frivolity and the odd visions of youth in an American plutocracy—all these elements being seen from the side of their charm, their gayety.

The Magnificent Ambersons and *Alice Adams*, if not winter tragedies, are in a more tragic tone: and they are peopled with vanity and folly and frivolity and the visions of youth in an American plutocracy—all these elements being seen from the side of their stupidities, oppression and heart-break.

The story of the attractive though snobbish Georgie Minafer, the spoiled creature of a mother's idolatry, he who cannot learn from others, who must bear down everything before him, who must be in all things justified, is admirably and originally conceived. It is an excellent story of a Magnificent Amberson.

But not, in my view at least, an excellent story of the Magnificent Ambersons, capitally as the changing back-ground is handled, and the gradual impoverishment of the family. With the exception of Major Amberson and Aunt Fanny the mature figures of the book fail somewhat of the inner energies of their several maturities. The great romance of the book is George's love for his mother and hers for him; and this too is admirably and originally conceived. Yet after choosing this bold and searching theme, the author treats it in a manner somewhat too fancifully idealized, and not quite recognizably true to life. One can hardly believe that Isabel's maternal passion, which is uncontrolled enough to sacrifice her lover and commit every fatuous injustice to him, would yet be purged of every tinge of maternal jealousy or any unreasonable demands of its own. Still less can one believe that a son who determinedly disavows his first love in the interests of his jealousy of his mother would yet be capable of a long, deep attachment to this same love.

Besides, this exclusive and preoccupying maternal and filial union might have been depended on by the author as a sufficient cause of misery and misunderstanding in other relations for both mother and son without the extraneous plotting of neighbors and relatives and the *dei ex machina* employed to precipitate the tragedy. We see far too often the spectacle of an author carried away by a theme boldly selected. Here, for once, we wish the author had consigned himself freely to its natural momentum.

This is the weaker current of the book's movement. The stronger current is the narration of the civilizing of George, the natural and highly interesting manner in which the arbitrary and irrational qualities of his nature are modified by his growing knowledge of truth. This is all in that enchanted region of golden gentleness and clearness inhabited by William Dean Howells, by Turgenieff and Hawthorne. It must be a very dull or a very foolish reader who misses the large grace of George's social metamorphosis.

Of the same beauty and mercy of imagination is the metamorphosis achieved in *Alice Adams*. In the mid-western scene which Mr. Tarkington presents to us so admirably, Alice Adams herself, what she is, what spiritual materials she has for making

her life, become known to us with a pathos, a reality and subtlety that belong to the last excellence of craftsmanship. Here the mature are indeed mature. The whole picture of their ambitions is as remarkable as the picture of the dreams of youth. The cruelty, the competition, the pettiness, the hypocrisy of a plutocratic society is related with the sympathy of a profound wisdom.

The struggles of that crushing, competitive, painful dinner attended by the disillusioned guest and the brave, misguided heroine—the sight, the emotions, the sounds that accompany the passage of that fatal midland evening in the simmering, blighting heat, in which the day-dreams of Alice wilt and die like the flowers fainting upon the over-loaded table—the presentation of all this dinner, this evening, is at once one of the most torturing and one of the “best” pieces of expression conceivable.

The Magnificent Ambersons and *Alice Adams* follow the ways of French rather than English realism. “His manner is the manner of talk, and if the talk is sincere, that makes a writer touch us.” Henry James says of the gifted author of *Numa Roumestan*: “Daudet expresses many things; but he most frequently expresses himself—his own temper in the presence of life, his own feeling on a thousand occasions.” This might as aptly have been said of *Alice Adams*. Too many contemporary novels, especially on the great themes of love and marriage, have an effect of mere agreement with some “recent view” of these subjects, almost the effect of joining a movement, or rising to second someone else’s motion. Mr. Tarkington writes in the method of an individual response to existence.

In the midst of her mother’s nagging onsets at her father, and her father’s dumb, domestic misery, Alice comes on a packet of her parents’ love-letters and is permitted to read one of these mementoes of their early feeling:

She had remained upon her knees while she read the letter; now she sank backward, sitting upon the floor with her hands behind her, an unconscious relaxing for better ease to think. Upon her face there had fallen a look of wonder.

For the first time she was vaguely perceiving that life is everlasting movement. Youth really believes what is running water to be a permanent crystallization and sees time fixed to a point: some people have dark hair, some people have blonde hair, some people have gray hair. Until this moment, Alice had no conviction that there was a universe before she came into it. She had al-

ways thought of it as the background of herself: the moon was something to make her prettier on a summer night.

But this old letter, through which she saw still flickering an ancient starlight of young love, astounded her. Faintly before her it revealed the whole lives of her father and mother, who had been young after all—they *really* had—and their youth was now so utterly passed from them that the picture of it, in the letter, was like a burlesque of them. And so she, herself, must pass to such changes too, and all that now seemed vital to her would be nothing.

This is quoted for the grace of its individual reflective style. But the dramatic value of this episode of the letter-reading is of high interest also in the development of novel, the maturing of Alice's thought.

Of all the pictures of the Seven Ages, drawn in Mr. Tarkington's stories, none is more true to life than the delineation of Virgil Adams at fifty. He is seen at a critical point in his life and one feels the pathos of his fate more sharply than as though he were older. His moral drama appears unique. His is a case of conscience unresolved. Was it right or wrong—or rather, how wrong was it—for him to attempt to manufacture his own formula for glue; a formula secured indeed at the suggestion and on behalf of the great J. A. Lamb, and as a result of labors completely engaged and paid for by this agreeable manufacturer, yet a formula apparently discarded by him?

As to the worldly folly, the indiscretion of Virgil Adams, his fatal stupidity and weakness in not clearly revealing all his plans to his generous old friend and employer, the reader is left in no doubt. From the beginning his conduct is seen to be erroneous and ruinous on these points.

Yet one of the most curious effects of the book is the reader's instinctive assumption of the viewpoint of "old Charlie Lohr". One thinks very little about whether or not old Adams really is cheating his employer, very little about whether he is yielding to the devil. Old Adams remains a very good man throughout the work, whether he does or does not steal a glue formula. This singular situation could hardly be bettered as a picture of reality, and of the unselfish, mild and apparently excellent persons whom others occasionally point out to one as "crooks", and still others as valiantly defend.

Alice Adams is the most deep-thoughted of Mr. Tarkington's books. It has a more penetrating vision than is required by any of the other tales, into life's—

poverties, wincings and sulky retreats.

Conquest. The subsequent labor somebody else is to do for you. The happiness someone other than yourself is to achieve for you. The over-tones of every work of art vary to accord with the inner ear of the listener. For me the over-tones of *Alice Adams* have the subtle music of an irony upon all the illusions of conquest.

The excitement of this book lies not in what the fascinating heroine gets nor whom she enslaves, but in what she is. It begins with the moment when she stares into her mirror, and thinks, as she peers beyond her lovely posturings, "Who are you?" At the close of her absorbing career of illusory fancy and wistful chicane, her brave, new attempt to depend on her own resources and powers for the creation of her future forms the original and hopeful end of a story whose tragedy and originalities and hopes are all made of the sheerest stuff of truth inevitable.

"As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference is no democracy." So Abraham Lincoln wrote for an autograph many years ago: and the words may serve as a memento and autograph of a certain national philosophy. I think we are much to be congratulated in the possession of a master of fiction whose work is conceived in the wisdom of that gentleness which sometimes appears the most valuable wisdom known to our nation.

EDITH FRANKLIN WYATT.